

INDIA'S PARTITION AND QUESTION OF DALIT MIGRANT HOUSING IN DELHI

VAISHALI

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of History, University of Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

The partition of India was accompanied by a large-scale population expulsion, mass killings, forced displacement, and the creation of millions of refugees. Refugees arriving in India were sent to various provinces and States. They were housed in transit camps until the Government decided whether it was required to follow the refugee policy of repatriation or rehabilitation. This paper sheds light on Dalit refugees who following the Partition of India entered Delhi in search of shelter and employment. It will address the hypocrisy of the state and the issue of Dalit resistance with the state keeping the larger question of Dalit resettlement immediately after the partition of India in the background.

KEYWORDS: Partition of India, Dalit refugees, Shelter, Rehabilitation

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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the partition of India, the refugees arriving in India were dispersed to various Provinces and States. The government housed them in transit camps until more trains or other means of transport could be arranged. Meantime, State had to decide about the policy to be adopted for the resettlement or repatriation of these refugees.¹ Despite Delhi not being the first choice for many to resettle, about 70 percent had travelled to one or other places before entering Delhi.² But Delhi being the National Capital, the seat of the union and its proximity to Western Pakistan had attracted refugees. It was perceived as a site of extreme significance where national remaking and planning could be executed³. Delhi became the first place where government's policies were first experimented and then eventually taken to different parts of India. While there was a mass exodus of the Muslim population from Delhi to Pakistan, thousands of Hindu and Sikh refugees moved to Delhi bringing radical demographic transformation. They were accommodated by the government in temporary camps like Kingsway Camp, Tibia College area, Karol Bagh, and Shahdara. Dalit's peasants and labourers also entered Delhi in huge numbers. The Dalits had an urban and mobile background, much like their upper-class counterparts, and they migrated as a service class attached to the British colonial administration.⁴ Following the Partition of India, minorities too beheld for security and searched their co-religious and ethnic pocket in the cities.⁵ Family ties, geographic links and business contacts, the potential for further opportunities and who was giving hand to rehabilitate them determined where the masses migrated. Factors such as family ties, geographic origins, commercial contacts, possibilities of other opportunities and a chance of rehabilitation influenced the migration⁶ This paper analyses government policies on the question of Dalit refugees and their hypocrisy regarding it. It would also address their resistance towards the State.

STATE HINDERED DALITS TO ENTER INTO DELHI

Eve thought the government had made passionate claims about the "Indian" status of the Dalits during the

negotiation over their evacuation, they were never received with enthusiasm. The caste discrimination did not cease even in these unusual circumstances. Rameshwari Nehru remarked that they fled their homes and reached Indians side of the border with very little "hoping to be received with open arms, but found little welcome wherever they went"⁷

Sardar Hukam Singh a Sikh leader from East Punjab, raised his voice for refugees in the Parliament session on 6 September, 1949. He stated that "the country thought that it must win the freedom and that was done by sacrificing these refugees. If they are the victims certainly the whole country has to bear that burden...the problem is colossal and the task is gigantic but in spite of that the government has to bear it and solve it".⁸ He added further that the problems of millions of these displaced persons were increased manifold because of the vague and directionless policy of the State. Government makes sure that none of these refugees resorted to begging. As he states, "They only want facilities to earn an honest living and a shelter, however small it may be. Certainly it is the business of the government to provide facilities to refugees to settle down".⁹

Equally, Randhawa, like other officials of Indian bureaucracy, did not look favourably to allowing large numbers of refugees to freely enter and settle in Delhi. Chief Commissioner Sahibzada Khurshid, also wrote to R.N. Banerjee, Secretary for Home Affairs that: "I fully endorse Randhawa's view that refugees who cannot possibly be absorbed in the economy of Delhi, and there are thousands who come under this category, should be the subject of a vigorous policy of dispersal. Unless these people are sent away and rehabilitated the refugee problem will never be satisfactorily solved".¹⁰ Harijan Sevak Sang phased strong criticism for rehabilitating Dalits and Criminal Tribes in Delhi. It came to be known that the Dalit refugees had entered along with other refugees, about which the State was ignorant. The blame for increasing criminal activities was put on them, and the need for special staff to locate them was identified.¹¹ It was reminded that only those were to be rehabilitated by the State "who were known to have reformed and were considered entirely above board". It was also said that: "If they settled down in Delhi or anywhere near it, they will ravage Delhi and create a scare here.". Repatriation for them was therefore emphasized. The Deputy Commissioner of East Punjab, who was also the administrator of these tribes, had expressed his inability to resettle the Dalit refugees despite being asked by the government to do so¹².

NO PLACE FOR DALIT IN REFUGEE'S CAMPS

About 106 relief camps were immediately opened in Punjab, Delhi, Rajasthan, Bombay and U.P by December 1947, to serve millions of refugees. Though Delhi had opened twenty-five relief camps, Dalits had no place in them¹³. They were segregated from upper caste migrants in the transit camps as well as in the permanent settlement. They had nowhere to go but to the already existing Dalit colony on the peripheries of the city¹⁴ Anis Kidwai and Sushila Nayyar, disciples of Gandhi who were engaged in the rehabilitation work also oversaw the evacuation of Dalits from Tihar, to prepare the place for the caste Hindus to settle.¹⁵

Prafulla K. Chakraborty, a major chronicler of the partition refugees stated that the conditions in the camp were so woefully inadequate that it made them forget the refugees that they were once human beings. Shortage of water, woeful deficiencies of sanitary arrangements, inadequate supply of food and grains, scarcity of milk for children, and complete absence of privacy was the norm in these refugee camps. Life became harsher even for the people who had already used to live on very little. He defined camp life as 'nasty, brutish and short'.¹⁶ Nepotism and defilement further multiple their problems. Matters were settled by money and muscle power. One had to bribe if one wanted his or her case of compensation to be heard. Discrimination based on class, and caste, insensitive bureaucrats who happened to be mostly

from the upper middle-class made matters worse for the displaced people. Purana Qila refugee camp only accommodated those who could manage their living expense. The State's favourable attitude towards the upper castes continued as refugees sheltered in a single camp were moved together to other areas of permanent housing¹⁷ Ravinder Kaur argues that camps were segregated in a way so as to keep low caste refugees in separate camps, thereby preventing any affront to the sensibilities of upper caste refugees.¹⁸

Disagreement between the displaced Dalits and State can be seen clearly over the issue of shelter. First, Dalits were denied any space in refugee rehabilitation camps. Second, State resorted to all kinds of tactics to evict them from their temporary shelter, which they themselves founded. The letter written to Dr Sushila Nayyer by Kriplani of the Socialist Praja Party made it clear that the Scheduled Castes living in Karol Bagh area were not given any rehabilitation by the government. They built some shelter and formed Displaced Artisans Co-Operative House and Building Society on their own. There had been repeated requests by them to the government to allot this land so they could build suitable settlements themselves. The Improvement Trust, instead of paying attention to their request, charged them for damaging land they in fact improved.¹⁹ Bhola Ram Secretary of Displaced Artisans Co-Operative House and Building Society also requested Dr Sushila Nayyer for withdrawing the charges and providing help for the rehabilitation. He appealed to get them settled either on the same land which is most appropriate due to being surrounded by market where they could sell their handmade goods or in the refugee colony of Moti Nagar and Sarai Rohila.²⁰

Another chilling account came from Tis Hazari refugee camps where the 44 tents of refugees were burnt down by fire on 9th April 1950. Refugees claimed this was not the first time they had suffered due to fire, and requested the government to allot the houses made vacant by Muslims. On the same, another 100 refugees' huts were burnt at Bapu Nagari near Raj Ghat.²¹ A group of displaced persons narrated their difficulty to members of all India Refugee Federation at Tis Hazari. Mast Malan, an old woman in her seventies, who came from Sialkot, complained in tears about the lack of food for her five grandchildren. Whatever little she possessed had been destroyed in the process of eviction. Amaranth who was the Secretary of the Tis Hazari Displaced Person Association, complained about the government's unsympathetic and insensitive attitude. He stated that when the efforts to persuade the government to let us stay at our present huts had failed, he requested for provision of water, schools, hospitals, police protection and employment before being evicted. All these demands, however, were summarily rejected. He further stated that the refugees had become so desperate that one of them threw himself in front of a truck in the belief that this could enforce government and other refugees would get some concessions from his sacrifice. However, the government was unmoved and ordered the eviction of all unauthorised families from refugee camps. The individuals who protested were assaulted by the government.²²

During the negotiations to evacuate Dalits from Pakistan, the Indian government made many lucrative promises including Housing schemes by the Central government, grant of 12 acres of land to agriculturalists displaced Dalits, job opportunities in various mills and private firms as technicians and labourers.²³ Most of the promises, however, remained unfulfilled after the successful evacuation of Dalits from Pakistan. Rameshwari Nehru emphasised that what the government had done sympathetically was not substantial enough to the displaced people in reality and the "local population has in general been unhelpful almost hostile".²⁴

STATE INITIATIVE TO REHABILITATE DISPLACED DALIT REFUGEES

In Delhi, Congress's power and influence was threatened by various socio-political parties for not addressing the grievances of refugees. They continuously mobilized and supported Dalit resistance, strongly demands separate States and

blocks for them. All of this effort resulted in the formation of the Harijan section as an adjunct to the Women's section in the Ministry of Rehabilitation in 1948. Both the segments were headed by Rameshwari Nehru. The Harijan section of the ministry, however, was closed on 31 May, 1949, and its duties were subsumed into Harijan Sevak Sangh, which was recognized as a central government agency for the purpose. An annual grant of hundred thousand rupees was given to Harijan Sevak Sangh.²⁵ There was the Displaced Rehabilitation Board as well to prepare rehabilitation schemes to get the approval of the State governments and eventually help it to be executed. Rameshwari Nehru, however, states that it was not an easy task to implement the approved programmes because of continuous stiff opposition by the State governments.²⁶ She said that housing of the Harijan in the urban areas turned out to be controversial as they were not entitled to any evacuee home/property. They were allotted single-roomed tenements and tiny mud huts covered with tarpaulin as shelters. The government built these tenements for Dalit significantly to cater to the need of essential services (sweeping, scavenging, artisans, and labourers) required for the rich and middle-class urban migrants.²⁷

The government also had to rehabilitate Dalits to retain its urban planning programme which started with the introduction of the Delhi Improvement Trust and slum clearance scheme in 1937. Under the scheme, it was asked to develop about 1355 acres of land for general housing, dispersed a substantial number of families from the ghetto zone, subsidized 2,000 houses and preserved 3,000 acres of land for displaced person resettlement on both developed and undeveloped land. But the number of ghettos keep on increasing in Delhi following the partition, and refugees who were not provided with any shelter by the government, constructed temporary accommodation for themselves on all available vacant spaces as well as on the roadside. Officials found out soon that the evicted population not only added difficulty to the mission of slum clearance but also wiped out the achievements of the Delhi Improvement Trust.²⁸ The condition of these slums deteriorated following the Partition. In addition to this, the Anti-communal and Anti-corruption Board of Delhi reported that corruption was rampant and no work was done unless the officers concerned were bribed.²⁹ This made the rehabilitation programme more difficult for the actual beneficiaries.

Ravinder Kaur argued that there was differential support to Dalits from what was offered to the upper caste. Where the high castes refugee children were given loans worth USD 39,710 at low interest to study abroad, the Dalits were deprived of such provisions. High caste people got spacious residences in areas like Nizamuddin, Rajinder Nagar, Kingsway Camp, the localities which have become very upscale in contemporary Delhi. She argues that though caste was not mentioned as an influential factor in the settlement policies but the very apparatus of the State resettlement policies were clearly erected upon caste and class distinctions.³⁰ Segregation and separations of Dalits were to satisfy caste Hindu sensibility of purity and pollution norms.³¹

Dalits faced extreme difficulty in raising their voices and be heard by an insensitive government. The government remained undeterred even after the number of strikes led by Dalits. Mr Nehru stated that he was looking kindly at the sweeper's grievances after the conclusion of one such strike in 1952, and the sweepers deserved all the sympathy. However, the list of demands being drafted was so long that it could have never been met. He, however, also had opposed the advice of the communist leader, Mr Sadan Gupta who demanded the delay in the motion of parliament till the decision on sweeper demands was made. Nehru thought it was not wise to have an adjournment motion "hanging in mid-air all the time".³²

CONFLICT BETWEEN DALIT AND STATE

About seventy refugees living in the government housing at Karol Bagh and five hundred living in Gurmandi wanted to meet the Prime minister and the President to protest against the eviction notice served to them by the estate officers³³. This happened following Dalit protests in various places in Delhi. On 6 August, 1951, Anti-Delhi Premises Committee also resisted the displacement of the refugees without the provision of alternative accommodation.³⁴ On 17 October, 1953, Dalits protested against the alleged demolition of refugee's huts near M.M road criminization ground occupied mostly by Dalit employees of the municipal committee. They demanded the government to build the huts again. They threatened the government that they would live in the open until their demands are met and if any mishaps occurred, the blame would lie with the government³⁵. Similarly, about 150 peasants of village Malikpura which was situated near Kingsway Refugees Camp protested against Delhi and finance company in which six policemen were met with violence, and assaulted.³⁶ Anti-Premises bill United Front Committee called a meeting, gathered about 300 people at Ajmal Khan Market against the demolition of self-made refugee's huts. Here, invariably all the speakers criticized the heavy-handed attitude of the government for razing refugee's houses to the ground and people were encouraged to forge a united front against the anti-refugee outlook of the government.³⁷

CONCLUSIONS

In the aftermath of the partition of India, the best of the resources in terms of land, homes and jobs were reserved for the upper caste migrants. Dalits were denied any space in refugee camps, separate mass housing schemes were built primarily along with the previously existing Dalits colony on the peripheries of the city. The government built Dalit settlements due to the need of them as essential labour ((sweeping, scavenging, artisans, and labourers) to serve high caste residents and migrants. In the process of rehabilitation, Dalit had to battle corruption, immorality and nepotism in order to restart their lives. The Indian government keen on absorbing them as Indian nationals during the negotiation over their evacuation from newly formed Pakistan, did not change their predicament, as they were subjected to discrimination, and exclusion even in contemporary India.

'Declarations of interest: none'.

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Here I declare that I am the sole author of this manuscript. This paper is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. I also promised that if this paper accepted, it will not be published elsewhere in the same form, in English or in any other language, including electronically without the written consent of the copyright holder. I am thankful to the ICSSR (Indian Council of Social Science Research) for providing me Centrally administered Doctoral fellowship, to support my research.

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